



# **INSTITUTE FOR HISTORICAL** **REVIEW**

## **The Weight of Tradition: Why Judaism Is Not Like Other Religions**

By Mark Weber

Many critics of Israel and its policies make a sharp distinction between Israel and its state ideology, Zionism, on the one hand, and Judaism, or the Jewish religious tradition and outlook, on the other.

Anti-Zionist groups, with names such as “Jewish Voice for Peace” or “Jews for Justice for Palestinians,” and anti-Zionist periodicals such as *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, emphasize humanistic aspects of the Jewish tradition. They urge Jews to reject Zionism and instead embrace humanistic features of Judaism. Such groups, while critical of Israel and its policies, take the view that the Jewish community has played a basically positive role in society, but that sometime in the twentieth century most Jews somehow jumped the track by embracing Zionism and its aggressive ethnic nationalism.

In fact, the often cruel and arrogant policies of Israel, and the often arrogant attitudes of what is called the “Israel Lobby,” the Jewish lobby, or the organized Jewish community, are not an aberration, but rather are deeply rooted in Jewish religious writings and in centuries of Jewish tradition.

Most people prefer pleasant myths to unpleasant truths, and prefer to believe what is most comfortable and agreeable. That's one reason why so many of us like to think that all religions share common humanistic core values, and are all striving, each in its own way, toward the same ultimate truth.

But Judaism is not just "another religion." It's unique among the world's major religions. The core values and ethos of Judaism are markedly unlike those of Christianity, Islam, and the other great faiths.

Christians believe that Jesus suffered and died for all people, and Christians are called upon to spread the Christian message to humanity. In the same way, Muslims believe that the message of the Koran is meant for all humanity, and they are called upon to bring everyone to Islam.

But that's not the message of Judaism. Its teachings are not meant for all people. Its morality is not universal. Judaism is a religion for one particular people. The Jewish religion is based not on a relationship between God and humanity, but rather on a "covenant," or contract, between God and a "chosen" people -- the community known as the Jews, the Jewish People, the Israelites, the Hebrews, or the "People of Israel."

One major reason why the role of the organized Jewish community is a problem in our society is because most American Jews manifest a strong loyalty to a foreign country, Israel, that since its founding in 1948 has been embroiled in seemingly endless crises and conflicts with its neighbors. But there is another reason.

The role of the Jewish community is also a harmful one because Jews are encouraged to regard themselves as separate from the rest of humanity, and as members of a community with interests quite distinct from those of everyone else. This "Us vs. Them" attitude -- this mindset that sees Jews as distinct from the rest of humanity, and which views non-Jews with distrust -- is rooted in the Jewish religion, and in centuries of tradition.

Christians are supposed to live their lives in accord with the Bible, and especially the teachings of Jesus as laid out in the four Gospels of the New Testament, just as Muslims are called upon to live their lives in accord with the Koran. Similarly, Jews are supposed to live their lives in accord with the principles laid out in the Hebrew scriptures, the "Tanakh," which is also known as the Old Testament. These writings tell how Jews should think of themselves, and how they should interact with non-Jews.

A core message of the Hebrew scriptures is that Jews are a divinely “chosen” people -- a unique community distinct from the rest of humanity. In the book of Deuteronomy, for example, we read: “For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth.” /1

The Jewish scriptures also refer to Jews or Hebrews as a “People that Shall Dwell Alone,” or, in another translation, as “a people dwelling alone, and not reckoning itself among the nations.” In the book of Exodus, we read of the Jews as a people “distinct ... from all other people that are upon the face of the earth.” / 2

The scriptures also explain that if Jews uphold the “covenant,” and maintain their separateness from all others, they will be rewarded with great wealth and power over other peoples. In the book of Deuteronomy, Jews are promised that God “will set you high above all the nations of the earth,” and that “All the people of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you.” In another passage God tells the Jews: “For the Lord your God will bless you, as he promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow; and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you.” / 3

In the book of Genesis, we read: “May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you.” In another passage in the book of Deuteronomy, God promises to Jews “to give you, with great and goodly cities, which you did not build, and houses full of all good things, which you did not fill, and cisterns hewn out, which you did not hew, and vineyards and olive trees, which you did not plant...” / 4

In the book of Isaiah, we read: “Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you ... For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish ... The sons of those who oppressed you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet ... Aliens shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers ... you shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory.” /

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In the book of Joshua, we read: “I will give you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and you dwell therein; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive yards which you did not plant.” And in the book of Psalms, God says to the Jews: “Ask of me, and I will

make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's wheel." / 6

In the book of Deuteronomy, Jews are promised: "Then the Lord will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourselves. Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours ... No man shall be able to stand against you. The Lord your God will lay the fear of you and the dread of you upon all the land that you shall tread, as he promised you." In another passage, we are told that God says to his chosen people: "This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples that are under the whole heaven, who shall hear the report of you and shall tremble and be in anguish because of you." / 7

The moral code laid out in the Hebrew scriptures commands one standard for the "chosen people," and another for non-Jews. In keeping with this ethno-centric morality, Jews are told that they must discriminate against non-Jews. In the book of Deuteronomy, God commands the Jews: "You shall not lend upon interest to your brother, interest on money, interest on victuals, interest on anything that is lent for interest. To a foreigner [that is, a non-Jew] you may lend upon interest, but to your brother you shall not lend upon interest." / 8

Many portions of the Hebrew scriptures -- especially the books of Joshua, Numbers, and Deuteronomy -- tell of genocidal mass killings of non-Jews. The Jewish God repeatedly calls on his chosen people to exterminate non-Jews. The Jewish scriptures are perhaps the oldest historical record anywhere of systematic genocide.

In the seventh chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, we read: "When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you -- the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites -- seven nations greater and mightier than yourselves, and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them; then you must utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them ... And you shall destroy all the peoples that the Lord your god will give over to you, your eye shall not pity them." / 9

In the book of Esther, we read: "So the Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering, and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. In the citadel of Susa the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred people ... Now the other Jews who

were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and gained relief from their enemies, and killed seventy-five thousand of those who hated them..." In another passage in Deuteronomy, we read: "And we captured all his cities at that time and utterly destroyed every city, men, women and children; we left none remaining; only the cattle we took as spoil for ourselves, with the booty of the cities which we captured." / 10

In the twentieth chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, we read: "When you draw near a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. And if the answer to you is peace and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you. But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; and when the Lord your God gives it into your hand you shall put all its males to the sword, but the women and the little ones, the cattle, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as booty for yourselves; and you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you ... But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God give you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall utterly destroy them..." / 11

In the book of Joshua, we read this harrowing account:

"When Israel had finished slaughtering all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued them, and when all of them to the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai, and attacked it with the edge of the sword. The total of those who fell that day, both men and women, was twelve thousand -- all the people of Ai. For Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he stretched out the sword, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai. Only the livestock and the spoil of that city Israel took as their booty, according to the word of the Lord that he had issued to Joshua. So Joshua burned Ai, and made it for ever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day." / 12

In another chapter of the book of Joshua, we read: / 13

"And Joshua took Makkedah on that day, and struck it and its king with the edge of the sword; he utterly destroyed every person in it; he left no one remaining. And he did to the king of Makkedah, as he had done to the king of Jericho.

"Then Joshua passed on from Makkedah, and all Israel with him, to Libnah, and fought against Libnah. The Lord gave it also and its king into the hand of Israel; and he struck it with the edge

of the sword, and every person in it; he left no one remaining in it; and he did to its king as he had done to the king of Jericho ...

“So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded. And Joshua defeated them from Kadesh-barnea to Gaza, and all the country of Goshen, as far as Gibeon.”

Over the centuries there have, of course, been important changes in Jewish community attitudes and behavior. Jews today do not observe all the rules and commands laid down in their religious writings. For example, they do not put to death women caught in adultery, or kill anyone who works on the Sabbath, or put to death anyone who curses his father or mother. /14

All the same, the weight of tradition is a heavy one, especially when based on writings that are held to be sacred. Something of the attitude of separateness, chosenness and superiority laid out in the Hebrew scriptures persists to the present, and is manifest in policies of Israel, and of the organized Jewish community. /15

For some orthodox Jewish leaders, the “chosen people” is not just a superior or privileged group. They regard Jews and non-Jews as practically different species.

Rabbi Menachen Schneerson, the “Lubovitcher Rebbe” who headed the Chabad orthodox Jewish movement, and wielded great influence in Israel as well as in the US, explained: / 16

“The difference between a Jewish and a non-Jewish person stems from the common expression, ‘Let us differentiate.’ Thus, we do not have a case of profound change in which a person is merely on a superior level. Rather we have a case of ‘let us differentiate’ between totally different species. This is what needs to be said about the body: the body of a Jewish person is of a totally different quality from the body of [members] of all nations of the world ... A non-Jew’s entire reality is only vanity. It is written, ‘And the strangers shall guard and feed your flocks’ (Isaiah 61:5). The entire creation [of a non-Jew] exists only for the sake of the Jews ...”

Rabbi Kook the Elder, another influential and much revered Jewish leader, expressed a similar view: “The difference between a Jewish soul and the souls of non-Jews -- all of them in all different levels -- is greater and deeper than the difference between a human soul and the souls of cattle.” / 17

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, one of Israel's most prominent and influential Jewish religious leaders, says that non-Jews (Goyim) exist only to serve Jews. "Goyim were born only to serve us," said Rabbi Yosef during a sermon in October 2010. "Without that, they have no place in the world -- only to serve the people of Israel." /18

The view that Jews are a distinct people with a primary commitment to Israel and the Jewish community is forthrightly affirmed by Elliott Abrams, an American Jewish scholar who was President George W. Bush's senior advisor for "global democratic strategy," and in 2006 was a key advisor on Middle East affairs to the US Secretary of State. In his book *Faith or Fear: How Jews Can Survive in Christian America*, /19 he writes: "Outside the land of Israel, there can be no doubt that Jews, faithful to the covenant between God and Abraham, are to stand apart from the nations in which they live. It is the very nature of being Jewish to be apart -- except in Israel -- from the rest of the population." Judaism and the Jewish way of life," writes Abrams, is not "entirely voluntary, for the Jew is born into a covenantal community with obligations to God." Jews, he goes on, "are in a permanent covenant with God and with the land of Israel and its people. Their commitment will not weaken if the Israeli government pursues unpopular policies ..."

The Jewish sense of alienation from, and abiding distrust of, non-Jews is also manifest in a remarkable essay published in 2002 in the *Forward*, the prominent Jewish community weekly. Entitled "We're Right, the Whole World's Wrong," it is written by Rabbi Dov Fischer, an attorney and a member of the Jewish Community Relations Committee of the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles. / 20 Rabbi Fischer is also national vice president of the Zionist Organization of America. He is thus not an obscure or semi-literate scribbler, but rather an influential Jewish community figure. And this piece did not appear in some marginal periodical, but rather in what is perhaps the most literate and thoughtful Jewish weekly in America, and certainly one of the most influential.

In his essay, Rabbi Fischer tells readers: "If we Jews are anything, we are a people of history ... Our history provides the strength to know that we can be right and the whole world wrong." He goes on:

"We were right, and the whole world was wrong. The Crusades. The blood libels and the Talmud burnings in England and France, leading those nations to expel Jews for centuries. The Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition. The ghettos and the Mortara case in Italy. Dreyfus in France. Beilis in Russia and a century's persecution of Soviet Jewry. The Holocaust. Kurt Waldheim in Austria.

Each time, Europe stood by silently -- or actively participated in murdering us -- and we alone were right, and the whole world was wrong.

“Today, once again, we alone are right and the whole world is wrong. The Arabs, the Russians, the Africans, the Vatican proffer their aggregated insights into and accumulated knowledge of the ethics of massacre. And the Europeans. Although we appreciate the half-century of West European democracy more than we appreciated the prior millennia of European brutality, we recognize who they are, what they have done -- and what’s what. ...

“We remember that the food they [Europeans] eat is grown from soil fertilized by 2,000 years of Jewish blood they have sprinkled onto it. Atavistic Jew-hatred lingers in the air into which the ashes rose from the crematoria... Yes, once again, we are right and the whole world is wrong. It doesn’t change a thing, but after 25 centuries it’s nice to know.”

Time and again in history, Jews have wielded great power to further group interests that are separate from, and often contrary to, those of the non-Jewish populations among whom they live. This creates an inherently unjust and unstable situation that all too often has ended tragically in violent conflict between Jews and non-Jews.

In our age, the seemingly intractable Middle East conflict is more than just a problem of Zionism or politics, or a dispute over land. Israel’s often arrogant policies, and especially its inhumane treatment of non-Jews, have roots in centuries-old attitudes that are laid out in ancient Jewish religious writings.

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## Notes

1. Deuteronomy 7:6 and 14:2.
2. Numbers 23:9; Exodus 33:16.
3. Deuteronomy 28: 1, 10; 15: 6.
4. Genesis 27: 28-29; Deuteronomy 6: 10-11.
5. Isaiah 60: 10-14; Isaiah 61: 5-6.
6. Joshua 24:13; Psalms 2:8.
7. Deuteronomy 11: 23, 25: 2: 25.
8. Deuteronomy 23:19-20.
9. Deuteronomy 7: 2, 16.
10. Esther 9:2, 5; Deut . 2:34.

11. Deuteronomy 20: 10-14, 16-17.
12. Joshua 8: 24-27.
13. Joshua 10: 26-40
14. Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22: 20-21 / Exodus 31: 15; Exodus 35: 2 / Exodus 21: 17; Leviticus 20: 9.
15. Israel Shahak, a Jewish scholar who for years was a professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, provides striking examples of this in modern-day Israel in his eye-opening book, *Jewish History, Jewish Religion*, published first in 1994.  
( <http://www.biblebelievers.org.au/jewhis1.htm> )  
([http://members.tripod.com/alabasters\\_archive/jewish\\_history.html](http://members.tripod.com/alabasters_archive/jewish_history.html))
16. From the book by Schneerson, *Gatherings of Conversations*, published in 1965. Quoted in: Israel Shahak and Norton Mezvinsky, *Jewish Fundamentalism* (London: 1999), pp. 59-60.  
( <http://www.mailstar.net/shahak2.html> )  
([http://members.tripod.com/alabasters\\_archive/jewish\\_fundamentalism.html](http://members.tripod.com/alabasters_archive/jewish_fundamentalism.html))  
Also cited by Jewish scholar Allan C. Brownfeld in his review published in *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, March 2000.  
( <http://www.washington-report.org/backissues/0300/0003105.html> )
17. Quoted in: Israel Shahak and Norton Mezvinsky, *Jewish Fundamentalism* (London: 1999), p. ix.  
( <http://www.mailstar.net/shahak2.html> )  
([http://members.tripod.com/alabasters\\_archive/jewish\\_fundamentalism.html](http://members.tripod.com/alabasters_archive/jewish_fundamentalism.html))  
Also cited by Jewish scholar Allan C. Brownfeld in his review published in *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, March 2000.  
( <http://www.washington-report.org/backissues/0300/0003105.html> )
18. "Yosef: Gentiles exist only to serve Jews," *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), Oct. 18, 2010.  
(<http://www.jpost.com/JewishWorld/JewishNews/Article.aspx?id=191782>)
19. Elliott Abrams, *Faith or Fear: How Jews Can Survive in Christian America* (New York: 1997), pp. 30, 145, 181.
20. Dov Fischer, "We're Right, the Whole World's Wrong," *Forward* (New York), April 19, 2002, p. 11.  
( <http://rabbidov.com/American%20Jews/wererightworldwrong.htm> )  
Some of Fischer's remarks here are gross distortions of history. For example, his mention of "a century's persecution of Soviet Jewry" is a breathtaking falsehood. For one thing, the entire Soviet period lasted 72 years, not 100. And during at least some of that period, above all during the first ten years of the Soviet era, Jews wielded tremendous, if not dominant power. Rabbi Fischer seems to have forgotten such figures as Leon Trotsky, commander in chief of the young Soviet state's Red Army, Grigori Zinoviev, head of the Communist International, and Yakov

Sverdlov, the first Soviet president. (See: M. Weber, "The Jewish Role in the Bolshevik Revolution and Russia's Early Soviet Regime," *The Journal of Historical Review*, Jan.-Feb. 1994. ([http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v14/v14n1p-4\\_Weber.html](http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v14/v14n1p-4_Weber.html) )

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